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Kemp's ridley getting help with comeback

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Tracy Barnett
Express-News Travel Editor

PADRE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE —Charlie Robertson has to admit he's hooked.

Last year the Sea Turtle Patrol volunteer was cruising along on his ATV, taking in the sparkling vista and looking for the Kemp's ridley sea turtle tracks as he'd been trained to do, when a group of campers flagged him down.

"They had their tent set up, and these hatchlings had just come up and were almost walking through their tent," he said. He radioed headquarters and kept the hatchlings in place until the scientists tracking the turtles were able to arrive. The excitement of the moment stays with him still.

This year he's at it again, taking time from his business as an exterminator in nearby Flour Bluff to spend a day each weekend cruising the coast in search of the elusive endangered creatures.

But despite all the efforts of volunteers and Park Service professionals, it's the casual visitors to the seashore, like the campers encountered by Robertson in his rounds, who are often the first to spot the vulnerable nesting sites and the fragile babies.

That's why advocates such as Donna Shaver, a turtle biologist for the National Park Service, are trying to get the word out to the thousands of beachcombers, campers, anglers and other visitors who will descend on the seashores during this summer's nesting season, which is now in full swing.

"The assistance of the public is vital to the success of this project," says Shaver. "Beach users locate up to half of the Kemp's ridley nests that are confirmed on the coast each year. We need them to assist with watching these turtles and report them,

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and also not to inadvertently harm them when they're out on the beach."

Following the call

Seven-thirty a.m. came all too early to our campsite on this first day of Daylight Saving Time, especially since we didn't get our camp set up until after 11. And the whipping wind blowing sand into my sleepy eyes as I wrestled the tent into submission didn't help either. But as I sat in the Visitors Center Auditorium and listened to this passionate woman describe the circumstances of this gentle animal that she has devoted her life to, my querulous, caffeine-deprived state seemed a bit petty.

Shaver, who was named ABC's Person of the Week a couple of years ago, has been credited with leading the re-establishment of the Kemp's ridley sea turtle to the Texas Gulf Coast shores after this most endangered of all sea turtles had been driven to near extinction in this area. Most of its limited population had retreated to a beach in the Tamaulipas State of Mexico, where some 40,000 nests were recorded in 1947. Since that time, hunting, loss of habitat and commercial sea fishing, among other factors, led to its drastic decline; by 1985, the worldwide nest count was down to 702.

Now, thanks to recovery efforts in the United States and Mexico, the population has climbed to 12,000 nests. "We're seeing a lot of difference from when we started. We thought we were going to lose them," Shaver said. If current trends continue, the turtle could be downlisted from endangered to threatened within a decade, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

One key strategy for protecting the turtles was persuading them to re-adopt a nesting ground, which is why the Texas Gulf Coast is so important. As recent hurricanes have demonstrated, a single environmental catastrophe could wipe out a major part of the population.

"We wanted to make sure we didn't have all our eggs in one basket, so to speak," she said.

During a volunteer stint on the island in her college years, Shaver fell in love with the creature and vowed to dedicate her professional life to its preservation. She is credited with spearheading its return to Texas shores, together with the help of her small staff and a growing army of volunteers and other partners. She remembers when the Park Service launched the volunteer patrol in 1986.

"We had nothing — just a couple of military junkers on their last legs," she recalls. "We counted on the volunteers to make it happen."

Year after year, the team released sea turtle hatchlings from the Gulf Coast, let them enter the water with the hope that they would imprint or develop an instinct to return to the North Padre beaches. Year after year, the hatchlings were collected from the waters and raised in captivity at the National Marine Fisheries Service in Galveston, tagged for tracking purposes and then released when they were large enough to avoid predators. Year after year, none of them came back.

"It was like Linus in the pumpkin patch; if you have faith, they will come. There were no returns for 10 years." Keeping the program alive was a major challenge. But finally, in 1996, Shaver's faith paid off; one of their hatchlings returned. Then, one by one, others followed, eventually including many wild turtles that were not part of the project and are now naturally repopulating the area.

Last year, 102 turtle nests were recorded on the Texas Gulf Coast, 64 of them on Padre Island National Seashore — more than double the previous record of 50 in the state. This year, the volunteer force will reach an estimated 160, greatly extending the reach and effectiveness of the tiny staff. And it's not a person too many for this

daunting task: The group is responsible for patrolling 80 miles of beachfront, from dawn to dusk, from April through mid-July. This is important because left on their own, these nests are extremely vulnerable to vehicle traffic, high tides and predators such as coyotes. Once the nests are located, the eggs are carefully collected and incubated until the hatchlings are ready to release in the summer.

This year, Shaver is hoping for the best year ever. "It's like a present under the Christmas tree," she told the group of 20 recruits assembled here this morning in March for sea turtle boot camp. "We'll open this new season together."

'An awesome feeling'

For Sea Turtle Patrol volunteer Robertson, the experience of cruising the coast every morning is reward enough in itself. The typically laconic exterminator waxes poetic when he describes the experience.

"I took the 6:30 patrol, and it was perfect; with the sunrise you can see the sea mullet popping out of the water, and the sea trout exploding the surface. On a clear day you can see the dark shadow of the shark."

Volunteer Jim Helleckson, a retired border patrol officer, agrees; the weekly patrol is the high point of his week. Last year he ran across a mother turtle returning to the sea after laying her eggs and his volunteer training kicked in. He grabbed the radio and reported the find, then grabbed hold of the giant creature and held her there for about 15 minutes until the staff biologists could come and examine her. "Just having the turtle there, holding onto her — I just can't explain it, it's an awesome feeling," Helleckson recalled, reverentially. "It puts a tingle into your system."

Please contact Tracy Barnett at tbarnett@express-news.net with your ideas for travel stories.

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